Conflict, Education and Sport
Responses, Cautions and Questions

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Abstract

Recent years have seen increased attention paid to the connections between sport, education and conflict resolution. A myriad of organizations now mobilize sport to support peace initiatives and peace education, often based on the notion that sport offers a fun and inclusive social activity that can build relationships between disparate groups. A host of recent research support this perspective and has explored the specific contributions that sport offers to peacebuilding and conflict resolution. This article offers a brief overview of the sport/peace/education nexus, arguing that while significant opportunities for peace education through sport do exist, so too does the prospect of sport exacerbating conflict, dominance and violence. As a result, critical and cautious understandings of sport for peace are called for. In particular, a commitment to understanding and engaging with the political and social antecedents of conflict should accompany, if not supersede, any essentialist notions that sport necessarily supports the resolution of conflict.

Keywords: Sport, peacebuilding, education, children, politics, conflict.

Introduction

In recent years, the attention paid to the connections between sport and conflict resolution has increased, in particular the potential to support and build peaceful relations both within and through the cultures and institutions of sport and physical education. Indeed, an increasing number of organizations employ sport towards an end of social integration, cohesion, and/or (post) conflict resolution. Guiding much of this activity, for both practitioners and academics, is a general perspective that sport offers a fun and inclusive social activity, one that can contribute to the building of relationships particularly across disparate social groups. From this point of view, sport, as well as sport education, a pedagogical framework intended “to educate students to be players in the fullest sense, and to help them develop as competent, literate and enthusiastic sportspeople” (Siedentop, 1994, p. 4, cited in Kirk and Kinchin, 2003), offers a particular opportunity and entry point into peace and peace education. It is suggested that sport affords the socio-physical interactions and experiences that lead to both learning how to understand opposing points of view, as well as coming to terms with the perspectives of others (see Giulianotti, 2004), potentially leading to more peaceful coexistence (see Sugden, 2006).

At the same time, the critical tradition within the history and sociology of sport continues to draw attention to the ways in which sport – particularly in its conventional, competitive, masculinist, commercial and/or elite forms – exacerbates or even secures inequalities, social hierarchies, and political instability, processes that contribute to conflict and in turn limit the contributions of sport to peace. Geo-politically, the 1969 ‘Football War’ between Honduras and El Salvador left 6000 dead, 12000 wounded and 50000 homeless after a World Cup qualifying match ignited tensions between the two countries (Giulianotti, 1999). At a national level, the celebration of militarism through specific sports, like Canadian ice hockey (Scherer and Koch, 2010), and/or specific athletes, like NFL football player and Army Ranger Pat Tillman (see King, 2008), implicates sport culture in the perpetuation and justification of war. In addition, social conflict in and through sport extends to the micro-sociological level in at least two ways: the organization of competitive sport may encourage participants to seek and assert dominance, often through physical violence, over others (see Shogan, 2007) and the normative culture of sport tends to secure social hierarchies along lines of race, class, gender, sexuality and ability (see Coakley and Donnelly, 2009).

When taken together, these perspectives illustrate that ‘Sport stands in ambivalent relation to war and peace” (Guldenpfennig, 1985, p. 203). Indeed, modern sport is replete with such tensions; while the Olympic Games can be understood to support, if not exacerbate, competitive nationalism, the organization of the modern Games also proceeded from a strong internationalist ethos that looked to international sporting organizations as partners within the global peace movement (Quanz, 1993). Sport, then, continues to provide an opportunity for various participants and collaborators – athletes, coaches, parents, spectators, businesspersons, politicians – ‘to learn’ conflict, and solidify its machinations, but also to consider, challenge and redress social and political discord.

In this short paper, I embrace this ambivalence while outlining some recent theory and research on the topic of education, conflict (and its resolution) and sport. In turn, I offer some critically informed conclusions about what can and cannot reasonably be attributed to sport, peace, conflict resolution and the educational process.

Lessons from the Field

As the development of this new journal indicates, research into the relationship between education and conflict, and education specifically within conflict and post-conflict situations, remains in initial stages (Tomlinson and Benefield, 2005). Broadly, while the right to education, particularly for children and youth, is well established internationally, it is a recent development that education has been positioned as particularly important for young people both during, and as a response to, conflict, with Graca Machel’s 1996 report to the United Nations entitled Promotion and Protection of the Rights of the Child: Impact of Armed Conflict on Children standing as a formative moment. While education is therefore increasingly recognized within efforts to redress conflict, Tomlinson and Benefield (2005) contend that a significant gap remains between research and practice, with both political and material limitations on the kinds of questions that can be asked and the importance of evidence collected.

Research-based understandings of sport, education and conflict resolution are in a similarly formative phase. While conflict resolution constitutes a central component of the increasing institutionalization of sport within efforts of international development (see, for example, Levermore, 2008) questions remain about the possibilities and limitations of sport for peace
education, and the studies that have explored these connections explicitly are relatively few within the broader social and political study of sport. Given that ‘there is relatively little evaluative and reflective material available about educational interventions in many post-conflict contexts,’ (Miller and Affolter, 2002, p. 1, cited in Tomlinson and Benefield) the recent analyses exploring sport specifically are worthy of attention, and may, in turn, spur an increased interest in, and importance ascribed to, the topic.

Before reviewing this literature, though, it is important to recognize differing paradigms within the literature. Notably, from a behavioural perspective, research generally suggests that participation within sport itself promotes and secures social benefits to individuals, including the skills necessary to resolve conflict. Arguably, such perspectives from social psychology tend to understate the political dimensions and contestations of both conflict and sport, respectively; as a result, sociological and community-based understandings of sport are here preferred. Three broad, though cautious, conclusions can be drawn.

First, recent research suggests that there is a role for sport in the act of bridging groups separated by conflict, particularly amidst entrenched ethnic divides. For example, Football for Peace, an initiative of the University of Brighton and the British Council has, since 2001, organized football opportunities as a basis for Jewish and Arab youth in Northern Israel to experience a measure of cultural co-existence where very few such chances abound. Embracing the importance of socio-cultural, political and pragmatic approaches to conflict resolution, Football for Peace’s efforts suggest that planned, locally focused and professionally managed sport programs can make a modest contribution to social integration (Sugden, 2006, 2010). Similarly, Gasser and Levinsen (2004, p.470) argue that the work of Open Fun Football Schools has been “strikingly successful” in re-integrating ethnic communities in Bosnia and Herzegovina, primarily through fostering play between young people from different groups but also through encouraging parents, coaches and organizers to cooperate in support of youth. Their analysis suggests that the efforts required to organize sporting bureaucracies may support community integration. More broadly, these studies suggest that once a commitment to bridging ethnic divides is established, sport offers a means by which to respond to such pledges.

Second, recent studies point to a role for sport within struggles to re-integrate those affected by conflict, particularly children and youth. Armstrong’s (2004) ethnographic analysis of football and social development amidst conflict in Liberia concluded that while football cannot solve social ills such as poverty, lack of education, and limited access to food and shelter, local football initiatives can offer a path to better health and an opportunity, both metaphorical and practical, to facilitate the development of youth character. In addition, Dyck’s (forthcoming) recent analysis of the place of sport, particularly football, within efforts of Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration (DDR) in Sierra Leone found that sport offered youth and children, who had formerly been soldiers, an opportunity to cooperate and rebuild relationships once direct violence had subsided. From this point of view, sport may contribute to providing youth an opportunity to re-engage socially, after violence and conflict has ruptured their community affiliations and connections.

Third, and more broadly, there may be a role for sport in supporting peace by challenging oppression and encouraging ethical citizenship. In their recent analysis of the sporting experiences of “athletes who have engaged in social or political activism,” Kaufman and Wolff (2010, p. 158) argue that participation in, and commitment to, sport may contribute to improved social consciousness, a sense of responsible citizenship, collaboration and interdependence, and a renewed
commitment to the notion of meritocracy. While none of these relationships are automatic or causal, the perspectives of athletes captured in Kaufman and Wolfe’s study do suggest that sport may propel, or contribute to, a sense of the social good, of which peace building and conflict resolution is clearly a constitutive element. This perspective aligns with the general understanding of sport education, namely that learning to be a sportsperson extends well beyond learning the physical and mental skills necessary to play the game; it also means learning norms of citizenship within the democratic structures that sport requires for its organization, and regularly celebrates within its culture.

Cautions

With these generally positive findings in mind, some critically informed cautions are called for within the ongoing analysis of sport, education and conflict. These points are not intended to diminish the importance of the research cited above but to caution against the tendency to essentialize or instrumentalize sport within the social and political context of conflict. Four cautions are put forth here:

First, given that sport can exacerbate conflict and/or contribute to peace, the choice of whether or not to ‘apply’ sport in situations of conflict stands largely beside the point. Sport can be integrative or divisive; as Gasser and Levinsen concluded in their research in the Balkans, ‘football is something like frontline farmland: fertile, but likely to be mined’ if not supported by a praxis of anti-violence. Second, then, in instances when sport is indeed conceptualized and mobilized as something of an inherent force for social integration – a discourse that does retain a measure of legitimacy despite sustained critical analysis (see Coalter, 2010) – it tends to privilege a ‘character-building’ approach to resolving conflict. This method can have the effect of usurping an engagement with the political antecedents of conflict, which is called for if not required, for sustained initiatives of peace-building.

In turn, and third, faith in sport as a tool for redressing conflict may, even inadvertently, position conflict itself as ontological, rather than socially and politically constructed. The result is a tendency to view uncritically, and even to reify, the spaces and relations of power that constitute the sites of conflict in which sport is mobilized. Similarly, sport comes to constitute a tool more than a praxis. That is, the reputed ability of sport to support change, or even the oft-presumed interest in sport among those in conflict, particularly youth, may problematically align with approaches that ‘apply’ sport but fail to interrogate the social and political underpinnings of conflict itself.

Finally, it is both interesting and important to question whether the ‘lessons’ of integration and peace ascribed to sport are considered applicable to adults as well as youth. It is reasonable to suggest that the sport/peace relationship tends to focus on youth at the expense of older populations, suggesting that ‘impressionable’ minds, but not older ones, are open to the lessons of sport, and that sport is ideologically fixed amongst adult populations. As Gasser and Levinsen found, a main benefit of sport for resolving conflict may be that it stimulates community engagement, a process that includes adults as much as, if not more than, children and youth.

Questions of/for Sport and Peace

In 1985, Guldenpfennig asked whether the broader sport community should approach conflict and peace ‘indirectly’ in order to attempt to maintain a measure of political neutrality, or whether sport should explicitly embrace a political mandate towards an end of
peace. This question was necessary given, he argued, that “it is scientifically, politically, and pedagogically fruitless to idealize sport and make it appear to be an oasis of primeval peacefulness, as has often been done. Rather a ‘peace and conflict research in sport’ must be developed.”

Clearly, researchers, particularly those in the educational and social sciences, are now grappling with this chore with some key studies explored above. Here, as a way of conclusion, I offer some critical questions as a means of building towards the research framework, and critical praxis, outlined by Guldenpfennig.

First and foremost, the question remains as to the social and political conditions and contexts that provide the best opportunities for sport to contribute to peace. That is, if the mere application of sport to conflict constitutes a limited approach to sustainable peace, it may be more fruitful for activists and researchers to examine instead the broader context of conflict itself and then consider the extent to which sport constitutes a reasonable response. For example, the rare opportunities for ethnic interaction within the segregated spaces of Israel, coupled with the popularity of football, likely underpin the success of Football for Peace but it is no guarantee that such success can be exported to other contexts. What, then, are the optimal conditions for supporting peace through sport?

In turn, how might it be possible to organize sport in order to support peace more directly? Given that initiatives of sport for peace (and sport for development more broadly) continue to receive primary support from the sport community and stakeholders with a positive sports background, it has been the rare occasion where the organization of sport itself has been re-imagined in order to best align with peace education. Again, given that traditional sport tends to celebrate dominance, how can sportspeople interested in the contributions of sport to peace organize sports in ways that de-center, or at least question, the competitiveness, aggression and supremacy that are regularly engrained in sport culture?

Finally, then, what challenges to the dominant sporting paradigm align with (or diverge from) the mandate of conflict resolution? In other words, how can we re-organize not only the organization of sport itself, but also physical education and sporting culture so that they become more peaceful? From this perspective, the goal of building peace, and resolving conflict through sport, may in fact give scholars and activists of both sport and peace an opportunity to re-imagine the social role of sport. This is not to suggest that competition be completely eschewed, only to remind us that conflict is not inherently negative but a potentially productive dynamic of human activity that allows for critiques and reconstructions (Tomlinson and Benefield, 2005). Sport will never be free of conflict; if it were so, it would likely lose that which identifies it as the sporting experience. Rather, the question is whether a social and political orientation towards justice can be mobilized in and through sport, one that usurps the ever-present compatibility of sport with the exercise of power over others.

In sum, it may be possible to include a commitment to peace, and peace education, within the dominant sport culture but I suggest that success in doing so will result from a political and pedagogical commitment to peace on the part of practitioners, activists, and researchers, and not from the simple application of sport to situations of conflict. A final, and oft-cited, example of sport and peace may lend insights here, that of the 1995 Rugby World Cup and the peace-building work of South African President Nelson Mandela in the year after the fall of the Apartheid regime. In a remarkable story brought to recent prominence in the Hollywood film Invictus and the ESPN documentary The 16th Man, Mandela purposively mobilized the Springboks – South Africa’s rugby team – as a symbol of South African racial unity as the country prepared to host the World Cup. The team went on to win the tournament and the

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event has been positioned since as exemplary of the socially integrative ‘power’ of sport. Indeed, The 16th Man (2010) concludes with Mandela’s famous speech in which he asserted:

"Sport can create hope where once there was only despair. It is more powerful than governments in breaking down racial barriers. Sport has the power to change the world."

However, closer analysis of the case shows that the impetus for peace – the critical moment that preceded the successful connection of the Springboks to South African unity – was Mandela’s commitment to a culture and process of peace in the destabilizing aftermath of Apartheid, and his strength in resisting the calls for race-based retribution, a movement that would almost certainly have led to civil war. While sport was certainly implicated in making possible Mandela’s successful opposition to violence, this resistance is best ascribed to his (and no doubt others’) commitment to peace, not to any transcendental elements of the sporting experience. Sport does not ease the importance of a political commitment to peace; at best sport may offer an entry point into conversations about, and struggles towards, peace building. If and when sport does offer a methodology to such ends, it is still beholden to praxis and the pedagogical challenges of resisting and redressing conflict.

References


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